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ABSTRACT

The Romantic ivory-tower metaphor literally controls physical space in ways which undermine both composition's place on campuses and much of the pedagogy and theory it employs. Compositionists' academic office space tends to be located in the periphery campus buildings or in the basements of more geographically desirable buildings. Both the focus on writing "geniuses" and the gendered response to them may explain composition/rhetoric's physical position in the academy and the ongoing debate about the "feminization" of the field. Implementation of collaborative-process theory into the classroom resists the lofty, lonely voice that marks the Romantic writing ideology. Genius-focused and gendered Romantic ideology combined with the metaphors expressivist theory and pedagogy use to talk about what writing instructors do, keep the field in its place. (Seven notes are included.) (RS)

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THE POLITICS OF SPACE IN (FEMINIST) COMPOSITION THEORY

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The Romantic ivory-tower metaphor literally controls physical space in ways which undermine both composition's place on campuses and much of the pedagogy and theory it employs. Let me visualize my claim: Compositionists' academic office space tends to be located in the periphery campus buildings or in the basements of more geographically desirable buildings.[1]

This reality makes the place of compositionists in the academy clear: Our presence on campuses goes nearly unnoticed. And yet the service we provide to the university is not completely ignored. Most university curriculum committees agree that composition instruction is a necessary component of undergraduate education. However, the assumption is that anyone can teach composition because no one can teach students to be creative, but anyone can respond to errors in the text.

Such an assumption underscores a part of the Romantic tradition entrenched in most universities,

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a legacy by which the individual who is born with the gift of genius and is able to tap into *his* sublimity and display it through writing is awarded physical space.[2] It is important to note that this writing philosophy is gendered; it was men who tended to be evaluated as creative, writing geniuses, the ones whose work climaxed in ways which were analogous to mountain-top experiences while women writers tended to be evaluated as ordinary people not capable of genius writing. Their work supposedly could not climax and for that reason was considered analogous to the lowly valley.[3] Both the focus on the genius and the gendered response to it may explain, in part, composition/rhetoric's physical position in the academy and the on-going debate about the "feminization" of the field.

Most compositionists don't aspire to be in the tower, especially and ivory one, for the "tower" doesn't serve our pedagogical and theoretical goals. In fact, in many respects the implementation

of collaborative-process theory into the classroom resists the lofty, lonely voice that marks the Romantic writing ideology. However, the way in which physical space is allocated at many research institutes suggests that the "tower" is the goal, for these office spaced tend to be more aesthetically pleasing and functional.

While most of us are familiar with this disparity, I encourage us to consider why. My speculation is that the genius-focused and gendered Romantic ideology combined with the metaphors our expressivist theory and pedagogy use to talk about what we do as writing instructors keep our field in its place. Recall some of our field's most common metaphors: writing instructor as mother,[4] writing instructor as maid,[5] and writing instructor as midwife.[6] These metaphors smack of the domestic sphere, a place that continues to be viewed socially as less significant than that of the public sphere. I wonder how the way we talk about our field contributes to other people's perceptions

of our discipline and, finally, to our physical position on campuses. In closing, I ask you to consider how we can theoretically and pedagogically

either reclaim these metaphors or generate new ones in order that we not be afforded physical spaces in patronizing ways but that we have authority to choose our own spaces, for as Adrienne Rich insists, a place on the map is also a place in history.[7]

Notes

[1]Susan Miller, "The Sad Woman in the Basement: Images of Composition Teaching," *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (Carbondale: SIUP, 1991) 121-141.

[2]Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: HBJ, 1929).

[3]Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,* London: R&J Dodsley, 1757. Thomas Eric Furniss, "Edmund Burke's Revolution: The Discourse of Aesthetics, Gender, and Political Economy in Burke's 'Philosophical Enquiry' and 'Reflections on the Revolution in France,' DAI 50 (1989): 593, 422

(UC San Diego). In part, this dissertation shows how Burke genders sublimity as male.

[4]Cynthia Tuell, "Composition Teaching as 'Women's Work:' Daughters, Handmaids, Whores, a Mothers," *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*, eds. Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter (Carbondale: SIUP, 1993) 123-139. And see Elisabeth Daumer and Sandra Runzo's "Transforming the Composition Classroom," *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender and Equity*, eds. Cynthia Caywood and Gilian Overing (Albany: SUNY P, 1987) 45-64.

[5]Miller.

[6]While the doctor-patient metaphor is not explicitly present in composition theory, it is common for composition instructors to use language that suggests their emphasis in teaching is on symptoms (i.e. surface level issues such as punctuation, grammar, and language interference not global issues such as claims and support). This may contribute to the schoolmarm image. See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1981) for the 'birthing' metaphor.

[7]Adrienne Rich, "Notes on the Politics of Location," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York W.W. Norton & Company, 1986) 210-231.